

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Film *To Live* from the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract— *From the perspective of New Historicism and in combination with multimodal discourse analysis theory, this paper explores the historical narration and discourse representation in the film To Live, directed by Zhang Yimou. By analyzing the interaction among three modalities in the film—dialogue, image, and sound—the study reveals how the film reflects the core ideas of New Historicism. These ideas mainly include the marginalization of historical narration, the localization of history in everyday life, and the transformation of inevitable history into accidental history. This study provides a new perspective for understanding the film To Live. It also offers theoretical support for the application of multimodal discourse analysis in film and television texts.*



Keywords— *New Historicism; the film To Live; multimodal discourse analysis*

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel *To Live*, written by Yu Hua in 1992, tells the story of Fugui's difficult and tragic life. From a wealthy family background to extreme poverty, Fugui experiences the deaths of family members, wars, and various disasters. Through these sufferings, he gradually reflects on the meaning of life and the resilience of human survival. The novel presents both the cruelty of history and the struggle of individuals against fate. The work embodies the characteristics of historical narration and shows a strong tendency toward New Historicism.

New Historicist novels challenge and deconstruct traditional historical narratives. Through their own

perspectives and discourse strategies, such novels reinterpret and recreate certain historical events and narratives. What they reflect is the enduring nature of humanity in real life, as well as a deep exploration of history and human existence (Chen Yi, 2023). In 1994, *To Live* was adapted into a film. As an audiovisual medium, film often produces a stronger communicative effect than literary works because of its unique visual and auditory forms of expression. Different symbolic forms, such as images, sounds, and language, interact with one another and together construct the discourse system of the film. The meaning of discourse is not generated by linguistic symbols alone. Instead, it is often produced through the

interaction and cooperation of linguistic and non-linguistic symbols (Yan Jing, 2024). In the field of discourse studies, multimodal discourse analysis has become one of the major research directions in modern linguistics. It mainly studies how different symbolic resources work together within the same discourse to construct meaning.

After the introduction of New Historicism and multimodal discourse analysis into China, many scholars began to apply these theories in their research. Multimodal discourse analysis has often been used in studies of film and television works. Li Yan (2022) reviewed domestic studies on multimodal discourse analysis before 2022 and summarized the development and research trends in this field. Yan Jing et al. (2024), with the help of multimodal software, conducted an empirical analysis of the food documentary film *A Bite of China: Chinese New Year* from three dimensions: discourse context, discourse expression, and discourse meaning. At the same time, some scholars have examined literary works and films from the perspective of New Historicism. In a master's thesis, Lu Xiaoli (2007) analyzed Chinese films through the lens of New Historicism and found that Chinese New Historicist films possess strong local characteristics. Wang Xiying (2013), guided by New Historicist theory, studied the literary works *To Live* and *Brothers*. The study aimed to understand the grand narrative strategies of New Historicism and the way texts abandon mainstream ideology.

To sum up, there are still relatively few studies that combine New Historicism with multimodal discourse analysis in the analysis of films or literary works. Therefore, this study adopts the perspective of New Historicism and integrates multimodal discourse analysis to examine the New Historicist ideas presented in the film adaptation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live*. The study aims to fill this research gap and provide new ideas and methods for related research.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on the perspective of New Historicism and incorporates the theory of multimodal discourse analysis in discourse studies. It analyzes and discusses the New Historicist elements contained in the film adaptation of the novel *To Live* by the well-known Chinese writer Yu Hua. The following sections provide a brief overview of these two theories.

2.1 New Historicism

New Historicism originated in the United States in the 1970s. In 1982, Stephen Greenblatt, a professor at the University of California, introduced the concept of "New Historicism" in the introduction to a special issue of the journal *Genre*. He used the term to describe the literary criticism practiced by himself and other scholars with similar academic interests (Wang Xiaotong, 2007). As a new form of cultural criticism, New Historicism quickly gained widespread recognition. Its major representatives include literary critics such as Greenblatt, Montrose, Oggel, and Goldberg, as well as the historian Hayden White.

New Historicism argues that historical fiction is a narrative form that closely combines history and literature. As a result, history exists in a fluid state between reality and fiction. Later, this literary critical theory, which became influential in Europe and the United States, was introduced into China. It had a profound influence on Chinese literary criticism and contributed to the rise of New Historicist fiction in China. Such fiction differs from previous forms of historical narrative. It no longer pursues the objective reality emphasized in traditional historical writing. Instead, it challenges and deconstructs traditional historical spirit and weakens solemn reflections on history. Writers reinterpret specific historical events and narratives through their own historical views and discourse strategies. In doing so, they deconstruct the grand narratives of traditional history and highlight marginalized histories that were previously ignored (Xie Linna, 2009).

2.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

As an emerging field of study, multimodal discourse analysis has become increasingly interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary. This theory argues that human communication is a holistic process involving multiple sensory channels and symbolic systems, rather than being limited to language alone. Language is no longer the only medium for transmitting information in everyday life. Different forms of media convey information through their own distinctive modes of expression. Therefore, visual culture has become one of the dominant cultural forms in contemporary society.

At the same time, film is regarded as one of the ideal objects for multimodal discourse research because it combines multiple modalities, including images, performance, and music. The theoretical foundation of multimodal analysis of film discourse comes from contemporary linguistics, semiotics, communication studies, and related fields. Although the theory originally developed from the study of written language, it has gradually evolved into an interdisciplinary research paradigm. It can effectively analyze complex texts in which multiple symbolic systems jointly construct meaning. In general, future studies of multimodal discourse will become increasingly comprehensive, involving multiple perspectives, multiple levels, and interdisciplinary approaches. Chinese scholars have also achieved certain progress in the study of multimodal discourse. However, the field is still at an early stage and requires further exploration with reference to international research achievements.

III. A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *TO LIVE* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEW HISTORICISM

Through the organic combination of dialogue, images, and sound, the film *To Live*, directed by Zhang Yimou, presents a deconstruction of mainstream ideology and historical rationality. At the same time, it reflects the

self-redemption of contemporary Chinese literature and carries an enlightening significance for ordinary people. The New Historicist ideas embodied in the film are mainly reflected in three aspects: the marginalization of historical narration, the localization of historical narration in folk life, and the transformation of inevitable history into accidental history. Together, these characteristics construct a profound reflection on and reconstruction of traditional historical discourse.

3.1 The Marginalization of Historical Narration

In Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*, the character Fugui represents the kind of "rogue-like" figure rejected by mainstream ideology. This portrayal corresponds closely with the New Historicist emphasis on marginalized historical narration. New Historicism argues that historical narration should move away from dominant ideology and instead adopt a marginal perspective. It focuses on marginal figures, marginal events, and marginal positions, while exploring their unstable and complex relationship with mainstream ideology. In this way, literary works can demonstrate their own ideological value.

At the beginning of the film, accompanied by the slow and sorrowful sound of the erhu, Fugui appears as a gambler. After losing a game, he casually signs his name in an account book and jokes, "Recently I've owed quite a lot of money, but at least my handwriting has improved." This detail vividly portrays him as a reckless and addicted gambler who wastes money without restraint.

The entire narrative centers on Fugui as a marginalized figure. The first half of his life is filled with irresponsibility and absurdity. He indulges himself in gambling and spends much of his time in casinos. Although he occasionally wins, he more often suffers heavy losses and accumulates large debts. He also shows little concern for his pregnant wife, Jiazhen. Fugui displays the characteristics of a typical spoiled young man: squandering family property, driving his father to death through anger, forcing his wife to leave home, and abandoning the happiness of his family. However, when

he finally decides to live an honest and stable life, fate continues to torment him. One tragedy after another falls upon him. His loved ones die in succession, and almost all misfortunes seem to gather around him alone. As a result, he falls from the peak of prosperity into the depths of suffering.

Fugui's experience is not merely an individual tragedy. Instead, it reflects the fate of countless ordinary Chinese people. As a symbolic figure, he represents those at the bottom of society who struggle to survive under difficult conditions. His life story mirrors the instability of historical circumstances, while the rise and decline of his family reflects the suffering experienced by many ordinary families. Through Fugui's difficult experiences, *To Live* presents a broader social and historical landscape behind individual and family histories. It allows viewers to glimpse the everyday life of ordinary people during that historical period. This narrative strategy, which focuses on marginalized individuals, is a typical example of the marginalization of historical narration advocated by New Historicism.

3.2 The Localization of Historical Narration in Folk Life

The deconstruction of grand narratives is an important narrative strategy in New Historicist theory. Through its folk-oriented narrative style, the film *To Live* presents a unique understanding of and reflection on history. One core characteristic of folk narration is its emphasis on the ordinary and secular side of human nature. In the film, the motivations and actions of characters are deeply connected with their individual personalities. The dialogue is also strongly rooted in everyday folk language, combining ordinary conversation with colloquial expressions and popular sayings.

In the film, Fugui is arrested while performing shadow puppetry and is forced to join the army. There he meets Old Quan. When Old Quan first appears, there is no background music. Instead, the audience hears only the noisy and chaotic sounds of the crowd. After learning that

Fugui wishes to return home to find his wife and children, Old Quan says, "What can we do? Staying alive is already good enough. You want to run away, but if I weren't looking for my brother, I would have taken off this yellow uniform long ago." This short dialogue not only explains why Old Quan chooses not to escape from the army, but also foreshadows his later death while searching for his brother's body.

There are many similar examples of folk narration throughout the film. This narrative strategy fully reflects the characteristics of New Historicism, especially its respect, concern, and sympathy for the survival conditions of individuals within historical contexts. In its representation of history, *To Live* attempts to recover and restore folk memory. It uses "folk historical consciousness" as a narrative tool in order to achieve a more comprehensive and multidimensional representation of history.

3.3 The Transformation of Inevitable History into Accidental History

New Historicist writers and artists often use accidental events in a flexible way to reconstruct history. In the film *To Live*, this historical contingency is deeply reflected in the deaths of Fugui's family members. In New Historicism, contingency suggests that history cannot be fully explained through logic or scientific causality. Cause-and-effect relationships appear incomplete and unstable at their origin.

In the film, the death of Fugui's son Youqing is a clear example of such contingency. The scene begins with a group of people running in panic. The background is filled with sorrowful erhu music. At the same time, a conversation is heard: "Is it Fugui's son?" "Yes. The district chief arrived at the school after dark. While reversing his jeep, he knocked down a wall. Xu Youqing happened to be sleeping behind the wall. Half the wall collapsed onto him, and he died immediately. The district chief was also injured and is now in the hospital." The film does not directly show Youqing's death. Instead, the event

is conveyed indirectly through dialogue. This creates a sudden and accidental sense of tragedy.

To Live is a tragedy centered on death and the suffering of human life. In addition to Youqing's death caused by the collapse of the wall, the film also presents many other unexpected deaths. Fugui's father dies from anger, Chunsheng's wife commits suicide, and Fengxia dies from severe bleeding during childbirth. These accidental deaths highlight the unpredictability and cruelty of fate. The deaths in the film do not seem to result from any clear historical necessity. Instead, death becomes a common and ordinary phenomenon, and its meaning therefore appears vague and uncertain.

These accidental deaths are designed to encourage viewers to reflect on the human condition and the survival of individuals throughout history. In this way, the film provides a perspective from which the tragedy of suffering can be observed and understood. New Historicism rejects the idea that human destiny is controlled by fatalism. It also breaks away from the fixed causal logic found in traditional historical narration. The history presented in the film is connected through a series of accidental events. Through the narration of individual experiences and unexpected encounters, history no longer depends on a carefully constructed causal framework.

IV. CONCLUSION

Using multimodal discourse analysis, this paper combines the three modalities of dialogue, image, and sound to examine three New Historicist elements in the film *To Live*: the marginalization of historical narration, the localization of historical narration in folk life, and the transformation of inevitable history into accidental history. The study analyzes how the film conveys personal thoughts and emotions through language, how it presents the destinies of different characters, and how sound contributes to the construction of emotional atmosphere.

From a certain perspective, *To Live* draws upon the essence of folk culture and reflects deeply on the

metaphysical question of "living." The film demonstrates the cultural language of human existence and expresses an ultimate concern for human survival. As a form of spiritual nourishment, the film gives people the strength to overcome despair and encourages them to continue living with resilience and hope in difficult circumstances.

This study has important theoretical and practical significance for deepening the understanding of the film *To Live* and for exploring the application of multimodal discourse analysis in film and television texts. Future studies may combine other theoretical perspectives to conduct more comprehensive and in-depth analyses of *To Live*. Such efforts may lead to more objective and comprehensive evaluations and promote further exploration of the film.

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